

Wordsworth's Pastoral and Children —“Michael”

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In *Lyrical Ballads*, there are five pieces which have the explicit subtitles “pastoral” or “a pastoral poem”¹⁾. “The Oak and the Broom: A Pastoral” is a kind of fable mainly consisting of the conversation between the oak and the broom. One of a few pastoral elements which can be found in it is the narrator who is a shepherd. Although the brief mention about shepherd (“For you and your green twigs decoy/ The little witless shepherd-boy/ To come and slumber in your bower.” (45-7))²⁾ can be found and the setting in which the Oak and the Broom were growing is in the country, it is far from traditional pastoral. The Oak gave the Broom a warning that the living things would perish soon (49-50) because troubles could befall to them anytime (25-6). However, the Broom did not take it seriously and thought that is the way it went. Unfortunately, it was the Oak that was hit by the storm and fell over while the “careless” Broom was left unwounded (105-9). Though the ending is ironical, what is described in the poem is harsh reality of natural world, unlike the “traditional” pastoral.

“The Pet-Lamb: A Pastoral” might be difficult to be categorized as “traditional” pastoral. When the poet saw a maiden

taking care of her pet lamb, he felt as if he had been hearing the conversation between the girl and the lamb and made a song of that. Though he alone imagined it, it seemed to him that he made it with her.

—As homeward through the lane I went with lazy feet,
This song to myself did I oftentimes repeat;
And it seemed, as I retraced the ballad line by line,
That but half of it was hers, and one half of it was *mine*.
(61-4)³⁾

As he repeated the song again and again, he finally felt that most of the song belonged to her.

“Nay,” said I, “more than half to the damsel must belong,
For she looked with such a look, and she spake with such a
tone,

That I almost receive her heart into my own.” (66-8)

Although it is true that the conflation of the poet’s heart and the girl’s is the characteristic phenomenon in Wordsworth’s works and it must be interesting to argue, this seems to be irrelevant in the context of Wordsworth’s pastoral.

Among five “pastorals” in *Lyrical Ballads*, the one that can be called an orthodox pastoral must be “The Idle Shepherd-Boys; Or, Dungeon-Ghyll Force. A Pastoral,” for at least at the beginning of the poem, two boys are sitting in the sun and enjoy playing the pipes as if they were in Arcadia.

Beneath a rock, upon the grass,
Two boys are sitting in the sun;
Their work, if any work they have,

Is out of mind—or done.
On pipes of sycamore they play
The fragments of a Christmas hymn;
Or with that plant which in our dale
We call stag-horn, or fox's tail,
Their rusty hats they trim:
And thus, as happy as the day,
Those Shepherds wear the time away. (12-22)⁴⁾

Since they indulged themselves in disport or started a race and tried to cross a bridge of rock above the deep gulf, they did not notice the faint cry from the depth of Dungeon-Ghyll (23-55). Fortunately, when one of them reached the middle of that rock, he heard the cry and found that a lamb had slipped into the stream and the cataract carried him to that gulf (56-71). Just when they realized it, the poet passed by the brooks by chance and rescued the lamb from the troubled pool (84-91). The boys were surprised to see the poet saved the lamb but were gratified to know he was unwounded (91-4).

Then up the steep ascent they hied,
And placed him at his mother's side;
And gently did the Bard
Those idle Shepherd-boys upbraid,
And bade them better mind their trade. (95-9)

Although the boys worried about the lamb and showed their affection and kindness to it by taking him immediately to his mother, the poet warned them to fulfill their duty. In other words, though it seemed that the boys were in Arcadia like the shepherds in traditional pastoral, they were woken up to reality by the severe

surroundings. It turned out that nature surrounding them was not ideal and they were real shepherds.

As far as Wordsworthian pastorals are concerned, it seems “The Brothers” and “Michael” are important to be considered. Both treat the real shepherds’ life in severe nature. For example, in “The Brothers”, the priest told the harshness of the local nature to Leonard, whom he considered to be a stranger, as follows:

For accidents and changes such as these,
 We want not store of them ;—a waterspout
 Will bring down half a mountain ; what a feast
 For folks that wander up and down like you,
 To see an acre’s breadth of that wide cliff
 One roaring cataract! a sharp May-storm
 Will come with loads of January snow,
 And in one night send twenty score of sheep
 To feed the ravens; or a shepherd dies
 By some untoward death among the rocks:
 The ice breaks up and sweeps away a bridge;

A wood is felled:—and then for our own homes! (146-57)⁵⁾

The inhabitants of this pastoral world, including the cattle, have to confront a fear and danger of overwhelming disasters such as flooding and landslide in daily life. It is not the ideal place for the escape from the stressful city life or for indulgence in wondering about the lover. It sometimes causes a fatal catastrophe.

The condition in “Michael” is the same as that of “The Brothers.” Nature gives the shepherd Michael bitter trials.

He heard the South

Make subterraneous music, like the noise
 Of bagpipers on distant Highland hills.
 The Shepherd, at such warning, of his flock
 Bethought him, and he to himself would say,
 "The winds are now devising work for me!"
 And, truly, at all times, the storm, that derives
 The traveller to a shelter, summoned him
 Up to the mountains: he had been alone
 Amid the heart of many thousand mists,

That came to him, and left him, on the heights. (50-60)⁶

He has to go out in the storm in order to protect his flock when he gathers the danger from the sound of the wind. The nature is not friendly but troublesome as he complains "The winds are now devising work for me!" (56) He himself admits the harshness of nature.

Not only the surrounding nature but also people's life seems to be very hard in the country in Wordsworth's pastorals. For instance, in "The Brothers" Leonard and James were brought up by their grandfather Walter because their parents had already died (226-30). However, he had to work hard because the land he inherited had been mortgaged. As a result, he sacrificed his own life.

Through five long generations had the heart
 Of Walter's forefathers o'erflowed the bounds
 Of their inheritance, that single cottage—
 You see it yonder! and those few green fields.
 They toiled and wrought, and still, from sire to son,
 Each struggled, and each yielded as before

A little—yet a little,—and old Walter,
 They left to him the family heart, and land
 With other burthens than the crop it bore.
 Year after year the old man still kept up
 A cheerful mind,—and buffeted with bond,
 Interest, and mortgages; at last he sank,
 And went into his grave before his time. (204-16)

Since Walter passed away, Leonard, the elder of the two, had to leave his home and went to sea in order to make living and the brothers were torn apart (306-13).

In “Michael” too “unforeseen misfortunes suddenly/ Had preset” (213-4) upon his nephew for whom he had stood surety and he “was summoned to discharge the forfeiture” (215). Therefore he decided to send his son Luke to another prosperous kinsman because it seemed that he had no other choice to repay the debt at his native province where every one was poor (248-54). In short, Wordsworth’s pastoral world is not an idealistic and safe place which was described in traditional pastoral. On the contrary, Wordsworth’s pastoral contains difficulties and danger from the beginning. Moreover, because of such difficulties and danger, those who are to succeed their forefathers’ lifestyle have to leave their native land and both they themselves and those who were left cannot escape from misfortunes or misery. In both “The Brothers” and “Michael”, children were expelled from “pastoral world” without their own choice.

It may seem inappropriate to use the term “a child” to refer Michael’s son, Luke, because it was clearly mentioned that he “had

reached his eighteenth year" (205). However, the true age is less important in my argument in this essay than the position as "a child" in the sense that Luke was Michael's son. Therefore, I dare refer Luke as "a child" in the discussion hereafter as well.

Though the natural environment is not safe and easy for the people living there, "land" has a significant meaning in Wordsworth's pastoral. Moreover, it would not be the exaggeration to say that this "land" that causes difficulties and danger which sometimes require sacrifice of human beings.

As we have already seen, though Michael helped his wife and toiled over his work earnestly, unexpected misfortune befell to him. His nephew for whom he stood surety failed in his business accidentally and he had to take over his penalty which was "little less than half his substance" (210-7). When he heard this news for the first time, he thought this report took "More hope out of his life than he supposed/ That any old man ever could have lost" (219-20). However, he had a second thought to take a positive slant and tried to face with the difficulty and thought about the possible solution.

As soon as he had armed himself with strength

To look his trouble in the face, it seemed

The Shepherd's sole resource to sell at once

A portion of his patrimonial fields. (221-4)

However, he had thought about it for two days and changed his mind to send his son Luke to another wealthy kinsman to seek work. What made Michael decide to let him go was the "land" which he had inherited from his ancestor and which he had to pass down to his son.

“I have been toiling more than seventy years,
 And in the open sunshine of God’s love
 Have we all lived; yet if these fields of ours
 Should pass into a stranger’s hand, I think
 That I could not lie quiet in my grave.
 Our lot is a hard lot; the sun himself
 Has scarcely been more diligent than I;
 And I have lived to be a fool at last
 To my own family. (228-36)

It seems natural that he felt responsible for the succession of his family property as a householder. However, he was also afraid of being mocked as a fool (235). He was quite conscious of his family’s judgment of him. In short, he was under considerable pressure to protect the land handed down from generation to generation. As a result, he had put his property before his son and decided to send his son to the town. In fact, he regarded this idea as “remedies” and “a cheerful hope” (243). However, it would also sound that it is a remedy or a hope for Michael not to become a disgrace to his family. When his wife Isabel heard this plan, she remembered a parish-boy who was helped by the neighbors to become a peddler. Fortunately he met a good master in London and was entrusted with a management of the overseas merchandise. As a result, he became rich enough to return the favor to his birth place (255-67). She imagined Luke’s success and accepted her husband suggestion. Michael was glad to see her agreement and said as follows:

“Well, Isabel! this scheme
 These two days has been meat and drink to me.

Far more than we have lost is left us yet.

—We have enough—I wish indeed that I

Were younger:—but this hope is a good hope. (274-8)

It must be true that Michael was proud of his son and was sure of his success, thus the plan to send Michael to the town is regarded as "a hope" in the sense of "expectation" and "help." However, it is also possible to interpret that it is "a hope" that he would not be scorned by his relatives. In short, it seems that this plan is not only for protecting the land but also to save Michael's honour if it had been seen a little cynically. When we trace his attitude toward his son Luke, it was a little ambivalent from the beginning.

This son of his old age was yet more dear—

Less from instinctive tenderness, the same

Fond spirit that blindly works in the blood of all—

Than that a child, more than all other gifts

That earth can offer to declining man,

Bring hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts,

And stirrings of inquietude, when they

By tendency of nature needs must fail. (143-50)

Michael seemed to love his son without reserve. At the same time, this passage implies that a child is distinctly considered as a source of "hope" and "forward-looking thoughts" (148) and it would be possible to suppose that the succession of family property is included in such a thought. In short, Michael might be concerned more or less about inheritance as well when he thoughts of his son. Or I would dare say Luke was precious for Michael not only as a son but also as a successor who would take care of his patrimonial

land after his death. Moreover, it was almost impossible for Michael to separate his son and his land in the context of affection and attachment.

As we have already seen, the first thought that came to Michael's mind was to give up a portion of his land. However, why did he change his mind after deliberation to send Luke to the town instead of selling the property? Of course, it was not true that he had no hesitation. In fact, Isabel found that he was distressed in a nightmare as Luke's departure date was approaching.

when she lay

By Michael's side, she through the last two nights
 Heard him, how he was troubled in his sleep:
 And when they rose at morning she could see
 That all his hopes were gone. (289-93)

It seems ironical that Isabel described Michael's show of anxiety as "all hopes were gone" (93) because it would turn out to be true. However, a letter from their kinsman in which he kindly assured their son's welfare and said to send him immediately seemed to encourage Michael and he decided to send Luke the next day (307-17). In other words, his concern about the repayment of debt and the succession of the land finally overpowered other indistinguishable anxiety.

It must be important to note that Michael clung to the "freeness" of the land. For example he explained his decision to send Luke as follows:

Our Luke shall leave us, Isabel; the land
 Shall not go from us, and it shall be free;

He shall possess it, free as is the wind
That passes over it. (244-7)

When he inherited the land, however, it was not free.

These fields were burthened when they came to me;
Till I was forty years of age, not more
Than half of my inheritance was mine.

I toiled and toiled; God blessed me in my work,

And till these three weeks past the land was free. (374-8)

That "the land is free" means that the land is "held without obligation of rent or service"⁷⁾. In English law, "ownership of a substantial interest in land held for an indefinite period of time" is called "freehold"⁸⁾ and those who possess such an interest are called "freeholder." It was true that freeholders often mortgaged a portion of their land for larger property or for cash and the payment would be completed not by themselves but by their sons⁹⁾. It was the severe reality of the rural world at that time. However, as Michael admitted by himself, the land would be "possessed" by Luke. If the land is possessed by someone, it would not be utterly free like "the wind" (246). While it would be free of mortgage for the owner of that land, the land is still attached to the owner. The same kind of conflict could be found between the land and Luke. As far as the land is free, Luke is tied to it as an inheritor and has to live the same life as a shepherd. On the contrary, like the case of Luke in the poem, he could be free and leave his rural birth-place to seek a new life once the land became "nonfreehold"¹⁰⁾. In short, Luke and the land were bound each other.

The succession of land for freeholder is not the particular

problem for Michael. As we have already seen, Walter, grandfather of Leonard and James, was a victim of the patrimonial land and its mortgage. And thus Leonard had to leave his younger brother James at their birth-place and went to sea to make satisfaction for the debt. Even in "The Oak and the Broom: A Pastoral", the Broom replied to the Oak's warning as follows:

For me, why should I wish to roam?
 This spot is my paternal home,
 It is my pleasant heritage,
 My father many a happy year
 Spread here his careless blossoms, here
 Attained a good old age. (65-70)

Even the broom realizes the heritage of the spot. It is interesting and important that the land is considered as heritage and that its succession would precede almost all the cases in Wordsworth's pastoral world.

As we read further, it appears that it is not only the land that binds Luke. The last evening before Luke left, Michael went to the valley where he had planned to build a sheep-fold with Luke and told him the family history and his feeling to his son. He confessed his ambivalent feeling that wished Luke to live the life that his parents and forefathers had lived in that rural area (365-71). In fact, his waver appears in his words.

—It looks as if it never could endure
 Another Master. Heaven forgive me, Luke
 If I judge ill for thee, but it seems good
 That thou shouldst go." (379-82).

He seems to be uncertain of his decision to send Luke to the town and to try to overcome his concern. However, his decision appeared again to be motivated by his strong desire not to give his land to "another master." In this sense, Michael himself was also bound to the land. At the same time, it sounds very ironical that his judgment really turns out to be "ill."

At last he encouraged his son as follows:

I knew that thou couldst never have a wish
To leave me, Luke : thou hast been bound to me
Only by links of love ... (399-401)

This passage is significant because it shows the fact that Luke was bound not only to the patrimonial land as a successor but to Michael as his son by "links of love" (401). "Links of love" here means the affectionate connection between the father and the son at the first face. At the same time, however, it could also remind us of "chains" or "fetters" that literally bind him. In this sense, Luke was deprived of his freedom by his father's love and impossible to be free like "wind" (246). While Luke was bound to the land that he had to inherit, he was also linked to his father who possessed it. In short, it is clear that it is almost impossible to separate the succession of the land and the bond between the father and the son in Wordsworth's pastoral world.

Although Luke's diligence was reported by their kinsman and he himself sent pleasing letters to his parents, he began to be lead into temptation of the city life.

Meantime Luke began

To slacken in his duty; and, at length,

He in the dissolute city gave himself
 To evil courses: ignominy and shame
 Fell on him, so that he was driven at last
 To seek a hiding-place beyond the seas. (442-7)

It is remarkable that Luke's ruin and runaway are described in only six lines while Michael's decision, inner conflict, anxiety and struggle for satisfaction were depicted in detail with more than two hundreds lines. This difference indicates that inner disturbance and unconscious effusion of Michael's belief are more important than the process of Luke's corruption. In short, one of the appealing aspects of the pastoral world for Wordsworth was the strong bond that linked people and the land where they lived. Moreover, the fact that such a bond had been established through the simple and earnest life which was handed down from generation to generation in harsh environment was also attractive for him. Therefore, shepherds symbolized people who accept their lot and live vigorously facing with various difficulties. In such a pastoral world, the child was destined to inherit everything including property and lifestyle from his ancestors, though sometimes he became a victim of the succession.

I pointed out that Luke's corruption was described quite simply, but I would put it in another way that it was described simply but efficiently. In short, the expression that Luke "began to slacken his duty" (442-3) and "gave himself to evil course in dissolute city" (444-5) show the bond that had connected him with his father and the home began to loosen because "slacken" refers "loosen" and the origin of "dissolute" is "*dissolutus*" in Latin which means

"disconnected or loose". In brief, that passage skillfully renders that one of the causes of Luke's ruin was "the bond" that bound him loosened as a consequence of his parting from the pastoral world. Since there is no description of Luke's remarks in this poem, it must be natural for the child to obey his father's decision.

Even after Michael heard the sad news of his son, he continued his daily work as usual. Why he could recover from the shock is explained as follows:

There is comfort in the strength of love;
 'T will make a thing endurable, which else
 Would upset the brain, or break the heart: (448-50)

It seems that Michael accepted the severe reality because it was a result of his affection toward his son and his inherited land. Unfortunately, his words became a reality.

... whatever fate
 Befall thee, I shall love thee to the last,
 And bear thy memory with me to the grave. (415-7)

In this way, Wordsworth tried to describe simple rustic shepherd and his distressful real life in order to exhibit the affection deep-rooted in his pastoral world. Moreover, even the child would become a victim of such a severe reality and deep affection. The complex bounds among the father, the child, and nature or the land could be a burden or the fetter which would deprive them from freedom.

NOTES

- 1) The subtitle, "a pastoral poem" was omitted from "The Brothers" since 1815.

- 2) William Wordsworth, "The Oak and the Broom: A Pastoral," *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 2nd ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-52) Vol. II 130-4. Hereafter cited as *The Poetical Works*.
- 3) "The Pet-Lamb: A Pastoral," *The Poetical Works* Vol. I 245-6.
- 4) "The Idle Shepherd-Boys; Or, Dungeon-Ghyll Force. A Pastoral," *The Poetical Works* Vol. I 238-41.
- 5) "The Brothers," *The Poetical Works* Vol. II 1-13.
- 6) "Michael: A Pastoral Poem," *The Poetical Works* Vol. II 80-94.
- 7) "Free." Def.28. OED.
- 8) "Freehold." *Encyclopedia Britannica CD 98* CD-ROM (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1997).
- 9) David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (London: Methuen, 1987) 142.
- 10) I owe the discussion about freeness of the land, Luke and Michael especially to Kiyoshi Miyagawa, 『自然と詩心の運動 ワーズワスとディレン・トマス』 (Osaka: OsakaUP, 1994) 136-65.

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